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These very interesting and helpful books contain short quotations of early Christians on important subjects, such as, worship, baptism, Lord's Supper, women's roles.

## VII

### Early Worship Services

*"Devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers"*

*Some New Testament Texts: Acts 2:42; 20:7-11; 1 Corinthians 14; 16:1f.; 1 Thessalonians 5:27; Luke 4:16-22; Acts 13:14-16.*

#### SOURCES

PLINY: [The Christians] affirmed, however, the whole of their guilt, or their error, was, that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. Even this practice, however, they had abandoned after the publication of my edict, by which, according to your orders, I had forbidden political associations. I judged it so much the more necessary to extract the real truth, with the assistance of torture, from two female slaves, who were styled deaconesses; but I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition. (*Letters Book X.xcvi*, addressed to the Emperor Trajan)

JUSTIN: We always remind one another of these things [our teachings]. Those who have provide for all those in want. [Next two sentences are the first two in VI.4] And on the day called Sunday there is a gathering together in the same place of all who live in a city or a rural district. The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then when the reader ceases, the president in a discourse admonishes and urges the imitation of these good things. Next we all rise together and send up prayers. And, as I said before, when we cease from our prayer, bread is presented and wine and water. The president in the same manner sends up prayers and thanksgivings according to his ability, and the people sing out their assent saying the "Amen." A distribution and participation of the elements for which thanks have been given is made to each person, and to those who are not present it is sent by the deacons. Those who have means and are willing, each according to his own choice, gives what he

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wills, and what is collected is deposited with the president. He provides for the orphans and widows, those who are in want on account of sickness or some other causes, those who are in bonds and strangers who are sojourning, and in a word he becomes the protector of all who are in need. (*Apology* I, 67)<sup>2</sup>

3

**TERTULLIAN:** We are a body with a common feeling of religion, a unity of discipline, and a covenant of hope. We meet together in an assembly and congregation so that praying to God we may win him over by the strength of our prayers. This kind of force is pleasing to God. We pray also for emperors, for their servants and those in authority, for the order of the world, for peaceful circumstances, for the delay of the end. We meet together in order to read the sacred texts, if the nature of the times compels us to warn about or recognize anything present. In any case, with the holy words we feed our faith, we arouse our hope, we confirm our confidence. We strengthen the instruction of the precepts no less by inculcations; in the same place there are also exhortations, rebukes, and divine censures. For judgment is administered with great authority, as among those in the presence of God, and it is the supreme anticipation of the judgment to come if any has so sinned that he is banished from participation in our prayer, our gatherings, and all holy fellowship.<sup>3</sup> Elders who are proved men preside over us, having attained that honor not by purchase but by attestation. For not anything of God's is determined by purchase. Although we have a kind of money-chest, it is not gathered from the fees of our leaders as if religion were a matter of purchase. Every individual puts in a small contribution on the monthly day, or when he wishes and only if he wishes and is able. For no one is compelled, but he contributes voluntarily. These contributions are trust funds of piety. (*Apology* xxxix.1-5)<sup>4</sup>

4

There is among us a sister whose lot it has been to have gifts of revelation, which she experiences by ecstasy in the Spirit during the regular services of the Lord's day in the church. . . . Whether it is when the Scriptures are read, or the psalms are chanted, or sermons are preached, or prayers are sent up, all such occasions are supplied with visions. (*On the Soul* 9:4)<sup>5</sup>

5

**CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA:** Always giving thanks in all things to God through righteous hearing and divine reading, true inquiry, holy oblation, blessed prayer, hymning, praising, blessing, singing, such a soul is never separated from God at any time. (*Miscellanies* VI.xiv.113.3)

6

Those who gave reverence to the discourse about God leave inside what they heard and outside lounge idly with the atheists. . . . Those who sing such and sing in response are those who before hymned immortality. (*Instructor* III.xi.80.4)

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**ACTS OF JOHN:** On the next day, since it was the Lord's day and all the brethren were assembled, John began to say to them. . . .

And having spoken these things to them, he prayed thus: [the prayer is addressed to Jesus Christ]. . . .

And he asked for bread and gave thanks thus: [again addressed to Christ]. . . .

And he broke bread and gave to us all, praying for each of the brethren to be worthy of the Lord's grace of the most holy eucharist. When he himself likewise tasted of it he said, "May I have a part with you, and peace be with you, beloved." (106-110)

[Chapter 46 has the same order of preaching, prayer, eucharist, and blessing. Cf. *Acts of Paul* 5, "bowing of knees, breaking of bread, and the word of God." Fig. 9 mentions singing and the contribution.]

## DISCUSSION

Our earliest description of Christian worship outside the New Testament comes from a non-Christian source. Pliny, in reporting to the emperor Trajan on his investigations of Christians, spoke of their assemblies (VII.1). The value of this early testimony is offset by its limitations. Pliny's information comes largely from Christians who have apostatized or have lapsed back into the world. Their conceptions may have been imperfect. Pliny himself had certain interests, which did not extend to the total conduct of the worship, and he necessarily saw the reports which he received in terms of his own experience.

The "fixed" or stated day for the common assembly would have been Sunday, according to the evidence assembled in Chapter VI. The pre-dawn gathering would have been necessitated by the social circumstances of the Christians: as slaves and workmen they could get away for their meetings only at such a time. Nearly a century later Tertullian listed among the Christian customs: "We take the sacrament of the eucharist, which was commanded by the Lord at meal time and for all alike, in congregations before daybreak and from the hand of none but the presidents."<sup>6</sup>

Hymns to Christ as divine were the most striking thing to Pliny about Christian gatherings. Another interpretation of the phrase translated "sang . . . a hymn" is possible. The phrase may be rendered "recite a form of words among themselves." In keeping with this rendering a baptismal interpretation of this passage has been proposed.<sup>7</sup> The words spoken alternately would be the interrogations and responses of the baptismal confession of faith (see ch. III). This interpretation has not won a majority and the Latin usage of the phrase argues for the common translation "to sing a hymn" or "to chant verses."<sup>8</sup> The translation

"alternate verses" should not be understood as "antiphonally." What can be deduced from Jewish influence on Christian practice suggests congregational responses to what is recited by the leader.<sup>9</sup> It does coincide with what we know of early hymnic material (for which see ch. XIII) to see the deity of Christ as the central content, for the early hymns were principally confessions of faith.

Private associations of the Hellenistic and Roman world required an oath (to observe the statutes of the club) as part of the entrance ceremony for new members. Pliny, concerned about the potential threat to the State of secret associations, was naturally interested in the content of the Christian's membership oath. What he learned has given some support to the baptismal interpretation of the gathering he was describing, for moral teaching was an important part of the preparation for baptism. The word for oath is *sacramentum*, from which "sacrament" is derived. Since *sacramentum* was used later by Tertullian with the Christian sense of sacrament, and in particular reference to the Lord's supper, it is possible that Pliny's informants spoke of this ceremony and Pliny gave to the word the more familiar meaning of "oath" and added what he had learned about Christian moral teaching. Or, the word may be a non-technical reference to the conduct inculcated in Christian assemblies. In this connection some have seen from the items listed an indication of the use of the Ten Commandments in Christian services.

The gathering later in the day, presumably in the evening, was for dinner. This meal was likely the "love feast" (or *agape*, Jude 12) which was observed in the evening at the time of the main meal of the day (ch. XI). It does not seem possible that Christians would have abandoned the Lord's supper even for an imperial edict, but they could have suspended their fellowship meals.

In spite of the problematic features of this text, it does call attention to some important features of Christian divine service: the Christ-centered nature of Christian worship, the intimate connection of worship and life in nurturing moral earnestness, and the corporate nature of the Christian faith which brought Christians together regularly as a community.

Justin Martyr (VII.2) gives the fullest and most circumstantial account of a second-century worship service. The extent of Justin's acquaintance and the circumstances of his *Apology* argue that his description is fully representative of Christian practice at the mid-second century. Justin's account follows immediately on

his discussion of Christian initiation and so is intended as a description of church life following on baptism. Justin does not refer in the passage quoted to singing hymns, which so impressed Pliny. At another place he refers to hymns in such close association with prayers that one may think he included hymns in his reference to the general prayer of the congregation:

We praise [the Maker of the universe] as much as we are able by the word of prayer and thanksgiving for all the things with which we are supplied, since we have learned that the only honor worthy of him is not to consume with fire the things made by him for our sustenance but to use them for ourselves and those in need and, being thankful in word, to send up to him honors and hymns for our creation, all the means of health, the various qualities of the different classes of things, the changes of the seasons, while making petitions for our coming into existence again in incorruption by reason of faith in him. (*Apology* I, 13)

Tertullian shows the same apologetic interests as Justin: rational nature of Christian worship, morally circumspect character of these gatherings, and good deeds done by Christians. He is more rhetorical, however, and he shows the reticence characteristic of the third century to speak about the Lord's supper to pagans. The chapter giving an extended description of Christian assemblies (VII.3) concludes with an account of a "love feast." There is no place for the Lord's supper in the context of this meal, and Tertullian's other evidence is against the Lord's supper still being a part of the fellowship meal at this time. Apparently he has deliberately omitted it from his account.

Other references from the second century give only a summary report of some of the acts of worship (VII.4-7). It is characteristic of Clement of Alexandria to weave together texts about religious worship with his discussion of daily activities. These summaries are of value for what stood out in the author's mind. They do point to the basic components of Christian Sunday assemblies.

What was done, and the order, constitutes the study of liturgy. The word is derived from the Greek *leitourgia*, which means "public service" and was used in the Greek Old Testament for sacrificial service. It came to be used by Christians for the public

ministry to God. It is now confined to services of worship. It would be the equivalent of the religious use of the word "services" in reference to gatherings for divine worship.

From the surviving accounts we find the following acts in early Christian worship: Scripture reading, preaching, [singing,] praying, partaking of the Lord's supper, and giving. The order of listing follows Justin (VII.2), for he seems to be stating the elements of worship in sequence and one passage from Tertullian (VII.4) agrees.

The prevailing theory of the early history of the Christian liturgy is that the Christian order of worship was built up from the Jewish synagogue service with the addition of the distinctively Christian rite of the Lord's supper. The latter, too, has antecedents in the Jewish Passover meal and table prayers, but these were family or home observances in Judaism. The meal became a part of the community assembly of Christians. These two basic parts of Christian worship have received various names: the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the table (or of the upper room), *synaxis* (assembly) and *eucharist* (next chapter), *pro-anaphora* and *anaphora* (literally "offering up" with special reference to the great eucharistic prayer), *fore-Mass* and *Mass* (after this terminology, which is the current Roman Catholic terminology, came into use), *Mass* of the catechumens and *Mass* of the faithful (on the basis that the unbaptized and those under discipline were dismissed after the first part of the service so that only the faithful remained for the Lord's supper), the Office and the Mass.

The liturgy of the word might occur daily, and Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* xxxv (VI.26) provides for daily periods of instruction and prayer. The Lord's supper was celebrated only on Sunday as far as our second-century sources go. Tertullian perhaps refers to the different kinds of gatherings when he mentions what occasions a Christian woman might have for appearing in public: "Either some one of the brothers who is sick is visited, or the sacrifice is offered, or the word of God is dispensed" (*On the Apparel of Women* II.xi). (Sacrificial language for the Lord's supper is considered in ch. X.) The synagogue-type service and the Lord's supper are fused in a united whole in Justin's account.

The synagogue service included Scripture readings, interspersed with Psalm chants, a sermon, prayers, and almsgiving. We find these same elements in the early accounts of Christian worship: readings, singing, preaching, praying, and giving.<sup>10</sup> Then the

Lord's supper had its own prayers, Scriptures, and formulae. The same components of the service and basically the same order, with considerable elaboration, formed the basis of the written liturgies which were produced in the fourth-fifth centuries.

Succeeding chapters will give special discussion to the Lord's supper, the prayers, and the hymns of the early church. Hence, more attention will be given in the following paragraphs to Scripture reading, preaching, and the contribution.

The Scripture readings (the lections) were taken from both the Old and New Testaments. Justin refers to the "writings of the prophets": early Christian authors use "prophets" as a general designation for the entire Old Testament. The "memoirs of the apostles" would be specifically the Gospels. Other New Testament writings were also read. The synagogue employed regular cycles of reading, and the later lectionary texts of the New Testament suggest that Christians from an early date did the same. Tertullian (VII.3) gives an indication of the importance of the Scriptures to the religious life of the early Christians. Many of the scenes in early Christian art are taken from Biblical history.<sup>11</sup> It must be remembered that the principal opportunity for most Christians to become acquainted with the Scriptures was through hearing them read in church. Therefore, the regular, consecutive reading of the Bible occupied a principal place in the service.

Other Christian literature and communications between churches might also be read at the Sunday gatherings. Thus Dionysius of Corinth writing to Soter, bishop of Rome, about 170 refers to a letter received from Rome and an earlier one which survives as Clement's *Letter to the Corinthians*:

Today we celebrated the holy Lord's day and we read your letter which we shall have always to be admonished by when we read it from time to time as also we read the former letter to us written by Clement.<sup>12</sup>

The preaching was based on the Scriptures read in the assembly (VII.2, 3, 4).<sup>13</sup> Synagogue preaching was either expository or took the reading of the day as a basis for a topical address. Early Christian preaching seems to have been predominantly expository. Thus the surviving homilies of Origen are expository in nature. So are most of the sermons from the great fourth-century preachers—John Chrysostom and Augustine. It so happens that the few